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ABSTRACT

How can vocational and technical education teach the work ethic to a new generation of workers? Interviews, a literature review, and a survey of three groups (vocational and college preparatory students, and entry-level workers) examined work attitudes. Research supported three conclusions: there is agreement on traditional work ethic attributes but today's workers have a smaller share of these attributes; the work ethic is acquired from infancy as a byproduct of one's home environment and the schools have done a poor job of teaching it; and vocational-technical education can teach the work ethic. The traditional definition of work goes beyond material output and reward. Today's employers are concerned with employability skills whereas employees focus on material values. The ethic is either in decline or in transition. Critics blame television viewing and low parent/student expectations for not learning the work ethic at home. Vocational education offers reasons to build pride through accomplishment: it endorses the creative urge, it offers real world experience, and it is a return to teaching values. Three recommendations can assist vocational educators in teaching the work ethic: higher expectations and greater realism, more use of physical facilities, and planning and public relations. (31 references) (NLA)

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DEVELOPING
The Work Ethic
THROUGH VOCATIONAL/TECHNICAL EDUCATION

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Ohio Council on Vocational Education
1990

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Foreword

The work ethic.

Is it alive and well in Ohio?

Or, does it leave something to be desired?

There's a good chance that you have an opinion on this topic. It's a topic that generated much discussion during the 1980's as three realizations shook a complacent America: intensified economic competition on a global scale, escalating job requirements, and a shrinking pool of job-entrants.

These trends led to an inescapable conclusion: America needs better workers in every plant, office, and field of endeavor. Workers with more professional knowledge? Yes! With more technical know-how? Certainly! With a greater command of the basic skills? Of course!

Running throughout the discussion was a nagging concern about something else: the intangibles that make a skilled, knowledgeable worker even more valuable.

Thomas Jefferson had a term for those intangibles — the habit of industry. We do, too. We roll them all into one ball and call it the work ethic. That's undoubtedly what The Milwaukee Journal had in mind on February 8, 1987, when it published a long story telling about:

- The near-perfect attendance record achieved by workers at a mattress factory;
- Employees who showed up at their factory on snowmobiles when heavy snows blocked roads to the plant; and
- The businessman who marveled over the fact that "our morning shift officially starts at 7 a.m., but you'll find [people reporting] at 6:10 a.m. [to talk] to the overnight shift and [sort] out any problems. Unbelievable!"

Perhaps these vignettes are a bit extreme, but they serve to translate intangibles into reality, and they unquestionably offer evidence of the work ethic long associated with Middle America.

To capture the essence of the work ethic in Ohio today, the Ohio Council on Vocational Education commissioned a study by Frieda Douthitt. This report presents Ms. Douthitt's findings and offers recommendations for the consideration of vocational/technical educators who wish to nurture the work ethic even more strongly in the wide array of programs they offer young Ohioans and adults undergoing retraining.

Dr. Joseph L. Davis
Executive Director

John R. Nelsen
Chairperson, 1990

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Executive Summary

It is while we are young that the habit of industry is formed. If not then, it never is afterwards. The fortune of our lives, therefore, depends on employing well the short period of youth.

— Thomas Jefferson

Americans may not have more of what is popularly called the work ethic than any other people, but they look upon it as a peculiarly American virtue. And to complain about its lack, especially in a generation or ethnic or geographic group other than one's own, seems an "American" thing to do.

What is the work ethic? Is there indeed less of it than there used to be? Can it be taught? Is it the business of the schools to teach it? If so, how good a job are they doing? Do vocational and technical education have a particular responsibility to teach the work ethic to new generations of workers? And, finally, how can vocational and technical education best fulfill this mission?

To attempt to answer these questions, the researcher talked not only with educators but professionals whose work involves observing other people's attitudes toward work. They included employers; representatives of organized labor; entrepreneurs; business, career, and personnel consultants; people in the criminal justice system; an executive director and human resources manager of a state trade association; a clergyman; a psychologist; and the director of a major metropolitan chamber of commerce.

The research included readings in educational journals, business and general interest periodicals, and several current books on the subject. Finally, with the help of a personnel counselor, a teacher, and a school community relations specialist, the researcher conducted a very limited survey of three groups -- vocational students, college preparatory students, and entry-level workers -- to try to capture some of the attitudes that students and young workers say they hold about work. The unintended inclusion of several older workers in the sampling provided additional insight.

The research supports the following conclusions:

1. There is general agreement on the attributes that make up the traditional work ethic. There is much less agreement that today's workers have a smaller share of it than earlier generations. Some authorities profess to see the evolution of a "new" work ethic in keeping with the changed conditions of today's work place.

2. The work ethic is acquired from infancy as a byproduct of one's home environment. Children see their parents go to work; older children work alongside other family members. To a limited extent, the work ethic can be taught to children and youths from environments where no work ethic is modelled. It is successfully taught by example; attempts to teach it in the conventional classroom have been less successful. The majority opinion is that the schools have done a poor job of teaching the work ethic.

3. Vocational and technical education are in a favored position to teach the work ethic, and there is some evidence that vocational students possess more of the traditional work ethic than their nonvocational peers.

This report describes how each of the research sources — the literature, interviews, and survey — supports these conclusions. It ends with recommendations of ways in which vocational and technical educators may make the most of their unique opportunity to impart the "habit of industry."

The Work Ethic: What is It and Where Did It Come From?

Americans have a cherished belief that the work ethic is a particularly "American" virtue. Indeed, this claim has some basis in history, for our society was formed by two movements that gave powerful impetus to the work ethic. The first was the Reformation, well represented in the first waves of European settlers to reach these shores. Protestantism signaled a profound shift from the early Christian condemnation of profit-making and the concept of work as punishment for original sin. Luther held that labor was the path to salvation.[1] Calvinism taught that wealth was the sign of God's favor.[2]

The sanction of wealth and work was philosophically compatible with the great secular intellectual movement, the Enlightenment, which held that man's natural state is perfection and he can reach it by his own efforts. The founding fathers were children of the Enlightenment. The notion that ordinary people are endowed by their Creator with certain rights as well as the ability to govern themselves finds full expression in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence.[3]

More Than Product or Compensation

With such theological and philosophical justification, and given the unbounded opportunity presented by a vast unexplored continent, the work ethic could not help but flourish in the New World. Work was rewarded. Work was exalted. Work was the American way. It had values that went beyond material output and reward.

Robert Eisenberger, writing of the decline of the work ethic in America, discerns three foundations of a personal work ethic:

- Moral value attributed to hard work;
- Willingness to work for material reward; and
- Pride in skillful accomplishment.[4]

Itzhak Harpaz speaks of instrumental and non-instrumental reasons for working. Instrumental reasons are economic; non-instrumental reasons "are expressive in nature."[5] Confirming the importance of the latter, he cites surveys of workers who were asked the "lottery question." The great majority would continue to work even if they won a lottery.

Nevertheless, there are those who think that modern Americans are motivated exclusively by "instrumental" reasons. The work ethic has not disappeared from our secular society but, they say, theology does not play a part, therefore, "the emphasis is mainly on hard work to achieve financial goals," and ethics has to do only with "how far one goes to beat the competition."[6]

Employability Skills

While it is unarguable that the work ethic comes to us through a history that imbues it with moral and spiritual values, today's employers and educators are more concerned with the outward signs of this inward grace. Employability skills take their place alongside basic education, pre-employment, and employment skills in vocational education. Ohio Vocational and Career Education Director Dr. Darrell L. Parks defines employability skills as "those attitudes and work habits necessary for productivity," and he enumerates seven areas:

- Reliability,
- Self-management,
- Worker functions (understanding of employment conditions, work standards and schedule, personnel procedures),
- Relationship to authority,
- Critical thinking, and
- Motivation.[7]

Employability skills — defined as problem solving, teamwork, the ability to set goals, and pride in oneself and one's work — emerged as the number one priority for vocational education at a conference of eight state directors of vocational education in Bloomington, Indiana, in November, 1988.[8]

Most of the people interviewed for this report agreed on a definition of work ethic that embraces some or all of these components. A sampling of the ways they defined work ethic follows:

> He or she plans the job, gathers the proper tools, allots enough time, does the work correctly and safely, cleans up the mess, and finally cleans the tools and puts them away.
>
> — A career consultant

> We're talking about the attitude of completion, finishing, doing what needs to be done to get the job done, more than [we're talking about] time spent on the job. . . . When you have that "buy-in," you don't have to watch people to get them to work. They're excited about it; they have ownership.
>
> — Dean of continuing education of a technical college

> We [Americans] buy the philosophy that able-bodied people should work. . . that work is a significant part of everybody's life. It's loyalty to the company you work for, striving to do better, taking the initiative and doing more than what's in your job description. . . .
>
> — Vocational school/community relations specialist

> There's no question about whether I get up in the morning and come to work. It's natural . . . .
>
> — Director of an educational program for incarcerated youth

> It's doing what you know should be done because it's right, not because somebody says you have to do it.
>
> — Executive director of a state trade association

Others mentioned matters of dress, speech, manners, appropriate behavior on the job, respect for authority. The overwhelming majority talked about attributes thought of as belonging to the traditional work ethic -- the habit of industry — and that is what work ethic will mean for the purposes of this report.

Material Values Weigh More Heavily

Students share this definition, according to the survey. Family members who exemplify the work ethic to them, they said, work late, bring work home, take self-improvement courses, go the extra mile, are faithful in their attendance, get along with people, put in steady effort, and do "whatever it takes." One student described her grandmother, "who works every day like it's her last."

Predictably, material values weigh more heavily than moral or spiritual ones with some students and younger workers. One said his father exemplified the work ethic because "he has four cars, a two-story house, a camper, boat, pool, and high-tech electronic equipment, and he enjoys working" (emphasis added). A former fast food worker speaks of his work ethic in the past tense. It succumbed early to lack of appreciation:

> I used to have a strong work ethic. I used to be at work a half-hour early, never call off, stay if I was asked, not be lazy, and just be a good employee. Since I have gotten no recognition I stopped working hard.

A Scarce Commodity?

The work ethic, like beauty, seems to be in the eye of the beholder. Some catalog its decline; others say it is still alive and well but suppressed by today's economy, government disincentives, working conditions, or management styles. Still others profess to see the rise of a new work ethic or "worth ethic." But the majority of those interviewed see a distinct difference between the work ethics of older and younger workers. The difference is revealed also in the responses of older workers in the survey, but the sample is too small to allow for generalization.

In Decline or Just Transition?

Those who see the work ethic in decline marshal endless statistics: Korean workers put in 47 percent more hours per week than Americans do; Americans place work eighth in importance, after their children's education and their own love life.[9]

Eisenberger says hardly anyone working today remembers when the work ethic was really robust. He charts its decay and the simultaneous growth of an "ethics of leisure" from the 1920s. The assembly line, labor unions, and Social Security contributed to its weakening. Widespread affluence following World War II, helped by advertising and television, fueled the pursuit of pleasure. Finally, the "human-potential movement" exemplified in the work of Abraham Maslow and other behavioral psychologists resulted in the counterculture movement of the '60s, the nemesis of the work ethic in America:

> Terms like self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and self-realization were used to connote a state of bliss to be gained by communion with one's essence. From this viewpoint, there was something inherently wrong with working hard toward conventional goals.[10]

On the other side of the ledger are studies like the one Harpaz reports showing that Americans ranked second among samples of the labor force in seven industrial societies in the percent who would choose to work even if it were no longer financially necessary. "The constituent element of the work ethic, represented by the value of wanting to work and hold a job, is still very much in evidence," Harpaz concludes.[11]

There is some agreement that the work ethic may still flourish in rural areas more than in the cities. Several interviewees spoke of learning the work ethic by having to do farm chores. One pointed out that Honda chose a rural site for its first American plant; a labor pool with a strong work ethic was one of its site-search criteria. A family-owned manufacturing company in east central Ohio started a mentorship program in the local high school to train young people for jobs in the plant in order to keep them in the community. It reports the first class of seven "are all willing to work. They've got great attitudes. . . ."

On the same page of The New York Times as the article comparing American's short work week and shallow value systems with the industriousness of Oriental workers is an item carrying quite the opposite message. Starting with a very narrow definition of work ethic — "producing goods and services through long hours of hard work" — organizational psychologist Kate Ludeman pleads for a "worth ethic." Modern management techniques have discouraged the love of work, she says. "Employees desperately need a stand-in for the extended family of old, someone to affirm their self-worth," and employers can supply that need.[12]

Pascarella concurs in this view of the love of work as an innate part of human nature that cannot flourish in today's work environment. "Asserting that the work ethic is dead," he writes, ". . . diverts our attention from . . . structuring and packaging work so that it invites better job behavior."[13]

> The fact that [people] still came to work demanding to be treated as a valuable resource even in the weak job market [of the early '80s] should have been taken as evidence of a strong work ethic, not the absence of one.[14]

Today's workers do not respond to the traditional incentives — money, fear, a sense of duty. They seek self-development, and the wise employer will find ways to fulfill that desire instead of "try[ing] to harness them with the jobs, incentives, and controls of the past."[15]

If for no other reason, employers are going to have to adopt new ways of relating to employees to be competitive in the "baby bust" job market we are entering, as Anthony Carnevale and Leila Gainer, among others, point out.[16]

Two Illinois vocational writers, Miller and Coady, advocate the reverse: that workers should adapt their work ethic to their employer. Their "enabling work ethic" would equip students with "an integrated and interactive system of attitudes, values, and beliefs that empowers an individual to adapt to and initiate change in order to sustain long-term harmony with his or her work environment" in place of a system of absolute values that could prove a hindrance on the job.[17]

A Gamut of Opinion

The interviews produced as wide a gamut of opinion as the literature on the current state of the work ethic. At the pessimistic end, they ranged from a complaint that entry-level clerical workers don't know any better than to wear sweatsuits to work, to an upbeat assessment of the newest generation of workers as "a killer breed" against whom the speaker himself, a former president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, would not want to compete. A state vocational education administrator noted that half of all high school students and two thirds of all high school seniors now hold part-time or full-time jobs as testimony that the work ethic is not lacking in young people today.

But most of those interviewed spoke of a difference between the work ethic of the new generation and their own; in most cases the comparison did not favor the younger generation. One executive hired an older receptionist because he was confident that an older person who wanted to go to work would have a strong work ethic. He has not been disappointed. A labor official said he notices an attitude difference between younger workers and older ones, but he pointed out that the nature of the work in his trades has changed greatly, too.

Several speakers pointed out that the work ethic is at least in part a product of the economy. "There's nothing that improves the attitude of youth toward work so much as a downturn in the economy," said a former state director of vocational education, comparing today's youth with those who dropped in and out of the work force in the 1960s. "Maybe times haven't been hard enough," mused a technical college dean.

The modern work ethic is also a product of school systems and management practices as described by a personnel management consultant:

> The two biggest issues I hear from employers today are the lack of commitment and loyalty and the inability to hire skilled workers. But younger employees today are defining work ethics differently than we did. These kids are looking for a high-paying career, partly because I think our educational system instills that expectation in them. That career means they're going to switch jobs a lot. Time and again I see employers who are willing to give a new employee off the street $2,000 to $5,000 a year more than they are to an employee they already have and who's a proven entity that they could promote. As employers, we're not willing to hold up our end to create the [corporate] culture that [encourages loyalty].

An association human resources director also mentioned the "worth ethic" concept, though not in those words:

> I don't think that you can expect employees to give their all and think about the company all day long and all night long if the employer is not giving something back to them. . . . If I, as the manager, expect you to respect me, than I must learn how to respect you. I must learn how to respect your creativity, your intellect, your different ways of doing things.

A pastor said too many well-intended government programs actually rob people of the will to work. He meets people who cannot afford to go to work because they are making more money from ADC (Aid to Dependent Children), welfare, unemployment compensation, or Social Security.

At the opposite point of view, a psychologist said he sees young people whose traditional work ethic stands in the way of their fulfilling themselves:

> I see young people — they're in their 20s, they're in an entry-level position, they don't like their employer, don't like the conditions, want to do something more, but they really have got it in their heads that it will be a blot on their records if they change jobs.

Younger Workers Goal-Oriented

The sample of 13 entry-level clerical workers included 10 people who had been out of school from five to 40 years. Their answers provide some generational contrast in value systems, though one must not attach too much significance to findings from so small a sample. Of the 10 older workers, all but one said the work ethic is more important to them now that they are out of school.

To the question, "In the light of what you know now, what was the most important thing you learned in school?" The three younger workers gave answers that indicate a work ethic, but one that is decidedly goal-oriented. The most important things these workers learned in school were:

- Never give up your goals.
- Not to sit on your rump and wait for things to happen [because] you need to work and work and work to achieve your goals. . . .
- How to "make it" in life . . . .

Of the 10 older workers, seven gave work ethic-related answers ("dependability," "responsibility," "how to meet deadlines") to the same question. Two mentioned specific skills, and one wrote "nothing." In contrast, of the 37 respondents still in school, less than half (18) gave work ethic-related answers when asked what they think five years from now will seem the most important thing they learned in school.

Teaching the Work Ethic

The work ethic lends itself nicely to the popular pasttime of taking the schools to task for not salvaging the failures of society's other institutions. The best — some would say the only — place to acquire a work ethic is at home, starting at an extremely early age, from parents who are themselves possessed of a work ethic. Nevertheless, schools by default have the burden of trying to teach it to children who have not learned it at home. By all indicators, they have not done well at this task. A qualifier must be entered for vocational education, but that is the subject of the next section of this report.

Placing the Blame

The education system, together with television and the quick-profit, acquisition-and-takeover mentality of American business, shares the blame for the destruction of the work ethic in this country, according to Eisenberger. So lulled are we by television that we are unable to measure how insidious is its influence. He paraphrases Marx: "Television is the opiate of the masses. . . . [By its] denigration of working-class and middle-class jobs and the mental passivity of flightiness produced by viewing, television is a strong force for laziness."[18] By age 16, most children have spent more time before the TV set than at school.

> The act of watching television and the nature of entertainment programming produce a generalized laziness and decrease the capacity to delay current pleasures for future rewards.[19]

Business, "caught up in the craze for short-term profits," bears its share of the blame. Eisenberger condemns "skill-killing automation," computer monitoring of worker performance, and the separation — often by continents — of engineers, planners, and managers from plant workers.[20] He opens one chapter with a description of a worker living in conditions we would call squalid and working in a turn-of-the-century industrial environment — with pride and enjoyment. The worker is a contemporary Japanese.[21]

There is some feeling that provisions of negotiated contracts, such as production limits, have been a negative influence on the work ethic. In the steel industry, the "past-practices rule" surrendered management's right to make changes in established labor practices. ". . . job responsibilities once assigned, could seldom be expanded, altered, or eliminated to conform to changing needs. The past-practices rule became an excuse by laborers to remain idle while collecting the highest wages in the nation."[22]

However, others place the blame for such provisions squarely upon management for allowing it to happen. A former director of vocational education stated that the greatest problem with the work ethic has been management — and parents who had no work ethic to pass on.

A new spirit at the bargaining table appears to now surround contract negotiations, reflecting closer cooperation between management and labor.

Education, instead of resisting the negative influences upon the work ethic, has succumbed to them. There is a note of incredulity in Eisenberger's discovery that teachers <u>are being taught to deal</u> with inattentive, TV-reared children (emphasis added).[23]

> Because large numbers of parents, educators, and students view hard work at school as unnecessary, American education at all levels has become lax. The typical American school year lasts 178 days, compared to 220 in England and 240 days in Japan.[24]

And he rolls out more statistics:

- One in five Americans is illiterate compared with one in 150 Japanese.
- American elementary students listen in class 46 percent of the time; their Japanese counterparts, 65 percent of the time.
- Two thirds of American students spend less than an hour a night on homework.
- Average standardized test scores are poorer than when Sputnik was launched 26 years ago.

— More high school students are opting for the "easy general track" rather than vocational or college preparatory (42 percent in 1979, up from 12 percent in 1964).[25]

As school achievement has dropped, grades have risen, according to Eisenberger. He quotes a 26-year-old who made good grades in high school without studying and now is having a tough time in technical college: "'Why should I [study and] take the risk of failure? You see, getting poor grades without studying is not failing. . . .'"[26]

These accusations are echoed even by those who take a more optimistic view of the work ethic.

> The education sector has not been doing an especially good job of building either an appreciation for one's own potential for development or positive attitudes toward work. The schools have become more concerned about supplying 'credentials' for work.[27]

The Commission on Workforce Quality, in its Labor Day 1989 report to the Secretary of Labor and the American people, criticizes both schools and employers for setting standards too low:

> Vast numbers of American students cannot meet the education requirements of today's workplace. . . . The Commission believes that this lack of achievement stems in large part from the lack of incentives for effort and achievement in school. . . . Most of those bound directly for the workplace know that the quality of their school work and the grades they receive will have little effect on their immediate employment prospects and virtually no effect on their entry-level wage rate.[28]

Even school people concur that the schools have not come to grips with the work ethic. Dr. Darrell Parks, describing nine initiatives to teach employability skills in Ohio (five of them in the Division of Vocational and Career Education), acknowledged: "A comprehensive and coordinated system to develop and reinforce those attitudes and work habits necessary for worker productivity is not in place in Ohio."[29]

Low Expectations

Among those interviewed, the educators were the optimists, in that almost all of them believe the work ethic can be taught. Most of them said that it can only be taught by example and in conjunction with other activities, not like another classroom subject.

"You can't stand up in front of a group of young people and tell them to have a good attitude toward work," said a retired vocational education administrator. "You teach more of these values on the elementary school playground than you do in the classroom." And a psychologist said, "It's taught best by example and by giving students role models of teachers who love their work."

The director of an educational program for youthful felons put it this way:

> I don't believe that you can make the work ethic a piece of your curriculum and hope that every kid's going to get it. A very few might get it as part of the curriculum. More are going to get it from observing you and me as models, and then a vast majority more are going to get it if the models are all over.

But not all teachers model the work ethic. The director spoke of a teacher who went to a rock concert on a school evening and was so tired the next day that all he did was show movies. Why did he even report to work? the director wondered. "Why come in and go through the motions of showing kids films all day? If that's the model we're giving them, how can we expect them to come out of our system with any kind of a positive feeling toward gainful employment?" A vocational school/community relations specialist worries that though teachers may be work ethic exemplars, students on early placement may work alongside people who model poor attitudes.

The educator who works with felons also talked of the difficulty of modeling the work ethic for kids who can make $200 in an evening selling drugs. It emphasizes to him the futility of the schools' trying to teach the work ethic if it is not reinforced at home. "It's going to take, in my opinion, a complete marriage between the school, the community, and the home to get us back to where I think I was as a young kid."

A technical educator faults the vocational schools for not demanding enough from students. "We don't bring enough real life into it," he says. "I think there is a concept that we cover this subject in 180 days and whatever we get done, we get done. There's no immediacy. If I want to bring something over to have it worked on at the vocational school, the understanding is that I can leave it there for five or six weeks. . . . If we're truly getting them prepared for a job, they should be able to work to the book" (referring to Mitchell's Standard & Professional Estimating & Repair Information, the manual that tells how long specific repairs should take and that auto shops use in preparing estimates).

Fear of parental wrath may keep educators from failing students who deserve to fail. And, "if there is no chance for failure, there is no success. There is no success if you guarantee somebody that they are going to pass," the technical educator points out. A personnel director thinks the general litigiousness of our society intimidates teachers from enforcing the discipline that kids need to develop a work ethic.

Students' Perceptions

Where do students themselves say they learn a work ethic? Eleven of 17 vocational students and 15 of 20 college preparatory students responding to the survey said they were familiar with the term. Eight of the vocational and seven of the college preparatory students said they learned it at home, from their parents. Five of the vocational and four of the college preparatory students said they learned it at school. (Obviously, some gave two answers.) When asked who in their lives exemplified the work ethic, 15 of the vocational students cited family members, as did 18 of the college-bound. None of either group listed a teacher, except for one college preparatory student whose father is a teacher. The student wrote, "My father. He works hard with his students and they really appreciate him."

Apparently, they are learning something about the work ethic in school, though. Eight of the vocational and 10 of the college preparatory students anticipated that work-ethic-related values would be their most important learning five years hence. (Five vocational students listed skill knowledge, and four of the college preparatory students

listed subject-matter knowledge.) When asked if they are learning about the work ethic in school, vocational students were more affirmative (12 yes; five no) than college preparatory students (four yes; 13 no).

Students singled out English (2), government, humanities, American history, automotive technology lab (3), administrative assistance (4), machine trades, and data processing (2) as courses where they were learning about the work ethic. Perhaps the most critical answer to the question if they were learning about the work ethic, and if so, where, came from a college preparatory student who wrote, "Yes, but by myself, not by a course and definitely not by a teacher."

Vocational Education and the Work Ethic

If the work ethic can be taught outside the home, the vocational setting is the place to do it. There is evidence that vocational graduates possess more of the character traits that employers identify with the traditional work ethic. Vocational education is the choice of criminal justice administrators as the avenue for returning felons to society because it offers a reason for academic learning and an opportunity to build pride through accomplishment. A vocational home economics program has scored some successes in teaching values through a practical-reasoning decision-making process. In a national survey, automotive employers ranked vocational graduates higher than nonvocational graduates in punctuality, attendance, work habits, and attitudes. Finally, there is some evidence from the students themselves that vocational students have a stronger work ethic than their college-bound peers.

Endorsing the Creative Urge

Vocational education's involvement with the tangible makes it uniquely appropriate for teaching the work ethic:

> One of the great things about vocational education is that what seems to be unacceptable in a traditional school is wholly acceptable in vo-ed, in that the person who comes in with that need to create, that need to work with her hands, to produce some material thing . . . if that person gets to a vo-ed school, she is likely to have that [ability] endorsed and appreciated.
>
> — Former vocational placement officer

> Pride in work is a part of the work ethic. If I am proud of that document, I feel better about working here. I am more willing to go the extra mile. I am loyal to this institution. So if we can develop pride in what kids do, I think we've made a big, big step. Not that the comprehensive student can't take pride in a paper he writes, but our kids produce something. If it's welding, they've welded a fender. If it's restaurant services, they've [prepared and served a meal]. If it's business and office, they see [their work] duplicated and it's theirs.
>
> — Vocational school/community relations specialist

I think we have a better vehicle to teach it than any other segment of education because we are an applied-learning and goal-oriented educational process. . . . When students are in lab, they have specific assignments that are to be completed within a specific block of time. They are held accountable for that work — either by having to turn in that assignment or by having that automobile run out the door on its own power, or by having the circuit board they've been working on actually [complete] a circuit that goes where they intended it to go. They're graded not only on their productivity, but on quality, and they can see it and they can experience it, can smell it, taste it, and touch it.

— State vocational and career education director

Classroom is an artificial situation. But if you put [students] in a machine shop, where they are working individually and particularly in areas where the teacher is not standing over them, you can teach work ethic. You can, but you have to decide you're going to teach it and plan your strategies. If discipline is a problem in that classroom, you haven't taught work ethic. If you have problems when it comes to clean-up time, you haven't taught work ethic. In a laboratory situation you have a greater opportunity than you do in a traditional classroom where the students are all looking at the teacher.

— Former state vocational education director

Offering "Real-World" Experience

Until a few years ago, Ohio's Department of Youth Services had an academically based public education system in the state's youth correctional institutions. Realizing that the profile of its clientele had radically changed, the department reshaped its curriculum to include a heavier emphasis on vocational education as more realistic preparation for re-entering the world outside the institution. An administrator of education services for the corrections system explains:

We have a responsibility to find some way to reintegrate them not only back to their [school] district, but if they are unsuccessful reintegrating back into

the district, back into the real world of work, because many of them have passed the age of 16 and they are on their way. Vocational education, I believe, will provide that and is providing it.

Youths typically come to the corrections system with a second- to fourth-grade reading ability. Work ethic-related problems (tardiness, absence, lack of self-discipline) have gotten them in trouble at school and with the law. Vocational education is a way of helping them find out what they really want to do in life — asking questions that they've never asked themselves and that no one else has asked them in their school experience.

"When they go into, let's say, our auto mechanics area, their eyes are opened up to a whole new area. [They say] 'My gosh, I didn't know that we paint a car while we're in here.' We've sparked an interest," the administrator says. Because of that interest, they often do better in academic areas as well. "Vocational education not only builds skills but we're giving them skills to say, 'Well, look, you know, if I did this while I was in the institution, I know I can do this on the outside when I'm back in the public sector.'"

Approximately a third of youth corrections clientele choose one of 28 vocational programs, and the Department of Youth Services is seeking to expand the number to 36 within the near future. (These numbers include community-based offerings and evaluation units.) Some of the inmates are eligible for Occupational Work Experience (OWE), in which they work off-grounds. OWE programs are State Department of Education supported programs targeted for 16- to 21-year-old academic underachievers with limited interest in learning who would benefit from work experience. The administrator tells of a young man who had an OWE fast-food job while he was in a corrections institution. Now re-enrolled in school in another city, he is working as an assistant manager with the same fast-food chain.

OWA (Occupational Work Adjustment) programs are State Department of Education supported programs targeted for 14- and 15-year-old underachieving, drop-out prone youth needing remediation of basic educational skills, work experience, and career exploration. OWE and OWA are important components of Youth Employment Academic Retraining (YEAR), a unique city-county-school system program to keep youthful offenders in school and in the community. They live at home and attend a special

school staffed by court officials as well as certified teachers. Fourteen- and 15-year-olds spend the morning at public works projects supervised by city employees and attend academic classes in the afternoon. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds are expected to be gainfully employed at least 15 hours a week. The YEAR experience promotes the development of a work ethic, as evidenced by one 15-year-old who told the director he couldn't wait to turn 16 so he could get a job. "He's ready. That's a positive comment," said the director.

For these young people, as for the general population, vocational education is education that can "turn them on" and give them the self-esteem that comes from knowing there is something the world values that they are good at doing.

A Return to Teaching Values

A vocational home economics teacher helps students develop value systems through a pioneering program in practical-reasoning decision-making. By encouraging students to ask questions such as

- What if everyone acted this way?
- What if I were the other person? How would I feel about this choice?
- Would I make the same choice if the situation were different?

she gets them to consider the consequences of their choices. When she tested a group that had been in the program as freshmen she found that after they had applied the new learning as sophomores they scored much higher in reasoning than a control group that had had higher reading scores at the outset.

"Practical reasoning works with those problems that do not have a single answer," she said, "but the teacher must be a role model of it. You've got to show that you're using it in your own life." A situation arose with a class member that presented the classic "teachable moment." The student wanted to quit her job because it left her too little time to study. Other class members had quit similar jobs with no notice. When the girl considered how her decision would affect her boss and co-workers, she decided to go to work that night and give two weeks' notice. Instead of being mad, her boss invited her to come back if she wanted a job in the summer.

The teacher acknowledged that her practical-reasoning curriculum is an about-face from the nonjudgmental approach teachers are used to. "Values -- that's a word that hasn't been used in the schools until the last few years," she says. "You weren't supposed to teach values. You weren't supposed to teach ethics. We were afraid that if I teach values, I'm going to teach you my values."

Another indicator that vocational students are learning work ethic values comes from the evaluation that the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence performs in certifying auto repair shops. A tally of employer's evaluations nationally shows that they give vocational graduates higher marks on attitude, attendance, and punctuality than workers who have not come through vocational schools.

(In fact, vocational graduates tend to be graded higher on their work ethics than on skills. A retired vocational educator who serves as consultant for ASE cautions that when employers say they want "well-rounded" individuals more than skilled individuals, they don't really mean it. "When they hire, they hire on skills," the consultant says. "You can lose your job on attitudes and habits, by you can't get the job on attitudes and habits.")

Finally, the survey yielded some evidence from students themselves that vocational students have a keener sense of responsibility than their college-bound peers. One of the questions gave students a choice: If you finished a messy job at quitting time, with no time left to clean up, would you:

- Leave the mess for someone else;
- Take the time to clean it up, even though you wouldn't be paid; or
- Put it off until you came to work the next morning?

Of the 20 college preparatory respondents, 15 would clean up the mess, two would leave it for someone else, and three would postpone it. But all 17 of the vocational respondents said they would clean up the mess even though they wouldn't be paid.

Strengthening the Work Ethic: Recommendations for Vocational Education

With its emphasis on "hands-on" experience and applied learning, vocational education is the best hope for teaching the work ethic to youngsters who have less opportunity to learn it by working alongside their parents and grandparents. When it comes to teaching the work ethic, vocational education has to be doing something right. This researcher endorses the suggestions, encountered repeatedly in the research, that there be more of it, that it be available to more students, that it be started earlier in the student's life and be available longer, and that other types of education (general, college preparatory) become more like vocational.

Carnevale and Gainer, in The Learning Enterprise, advocate that other types of education adopt some of the practices that are hallmarks of vocational education:

> Educators need to change some of their basic strategies. They need to work with employers to strengthen the link between learning in school and learning on the job; . . . link the teaching of academic subjects to real-world applications; . . . teach . . . how to think a job through from start to finish. . .

In vocational education a young person has the best chance of finding that special aptitude that, if nurtured, leads to a life in which a work ethic flows naturally from joy and pride in one's work. Career exploration and aptitude testing should be started earlier and be made a more central purpose of vocational education; "values clarification" should be taught along with career exploration and job readiness, beginning in middle school. As one vocational administrator maintained, the work ethic can be taught if teachers will formally recognize it as part of the curriculum and develop strategies for teaching it:

> In vocational education, we can develop the values of cooperation, of concern for quality, of responsibility, of caring for the machinery, of desire to do a good job. We can teach these things if they are part of our curriculum and we decide how to do it.

Cooperative vocational education (co-op) programs seem especially well suited for the development and strengthening of the work ethic. In co-op programs, the student receives on-the-job instruction by his/her part-time employer in specific skills and in the actual job setting, and the school teacher/coordinator coordinates the classroom instruction with the on-the-job experiences. Excellent opportunities should exist for teacher/coordinators and employers to plan, instruct, and coordinate reinforcement of various elements of the work ethic.

It is incumbent on both the school and the employer to assure that each co-op placement is truly a teaching/learning setting and not merely an arrangement in which the student is assigned menial tasks for an extended period of time, offering little opportunity for learning and growth.

Some other recommendations that evolved from the research were:

- That vocational education be part of a degree-oriented continuum that a person could return to again and again throughout his or her career, moving easily from one level to another even after months or years away from the classroom;

- That everyone, including college preparatory students, be exposed to some vocational education since many will have to work in order to afford college;

- That typing or keyboarding be a universal requirement for graduation in order to prepare students for work in the computer age; and

- That adult vocational education be made available to drop-outs and young adults who have been out of school a year to 10 years without finding their niche in the work world.

The interviews produced many other specific recommendations, most of which can be grouped in three areas: instructional, physical, and planning and public relations. Some of the following suggestions are phrased in the interviewees' own words.

Higher Expectations, Greater Realism

Eisenberger's assessment of the decline of the work ethic, though doleful, is not hopeless. He concludes that the work ethic can be taught, but the reasons that the schools are not teaching it is that educators (of all kinds, not just vocational) have lowered their expectations to the point that they reward mediocre performance. Rewarded high effort, he demonstrates, produces a "generalized increase in industriousness . . . [and] provides a behavioral technology for teaching industriousness." [31]

The insight that people respond to higher expectations with greater effort has more profound implications for education than any other finding of this study. It tells us that great improvement is possible using the programs, people, and facilities already in place. Many interview comments on instructional aspects of vocational education urged teachers to demand higher effort:

> **Demand more.** We're not demanding enough in classrooms. If we're truly getting them prepared for a job, they should be able to "work to the book."
>
> **Get realistic.** Education has to get realistic about what the business world expects out of entry-level employees, and if that means you give them more hours a day on the typewriter, then give them more hours.
>
> **Enforce standards.** If they don't complete [training], we [apprenticeship programs] don't mess around like a school. We boot them out.

Vocational education could profitably adopt more practices from the business world: teaching by contract, quality circles, team projects. Other recommendations for strengthening the work ethic included teaching labor history, inviting advisory committee members who own businesses to speak to vocational classes on entrepreneurship, mentoring, and peer teaching:

> **Quality circles.** Youngsters can do the same kinds of things that people in the work place do. . . . Often when students work together there is peer pressure to really bring them along.

Labor history. [Kids] don't appreciate what labor has done for them, the struggles of labor in this country.

Entrepreneurship. Some work ethic concepts just naturally come out of talking about entrepreneurship, [like] pleasing your customer. What employer doesn't want that embedded in the kids?

Mentoring. Connected with the classroom, they need to have mentoring programs where students are with a person in the community, working on a job. They need to have a variety of these experiences so that there's a career awareness of multiple opportunities.

Peer teaching. If you group youth by ability levels — and young people are not really antagonized by that — they like working with other students, and students become some of the best teachers as a result.

More Use of Physical Facilities

Many people feel that insufficient use is made of vocational facilities. Some of their suggestions are included even though the author realizes that to implement them would pose financial, scheduling, and logistical problems. One former vocational educator, for instance, felt that little children whose mothers work could be learning about work in vocational laboratories after classes have gone instead of spending their afternoons at day care centers.

Vocational preschool. Children need to be exposed to the hands-on things in life with which we have lost touch. Vocational schools dismiss students pretty early. There are whole classrooms sitting empty, so why not use them for little kids?

Night school. The schools don't need to be closed at 5 in the evening. Every one of them has lights, and they work. Have adult ed classes in the evening. [Some community colleges] have classes going from 7 in the morning till 11 or 12 at night. (Many vocational schools, too, are used for adult classes in the evening.)

Planning and Public Relations

The executive director of a trade association said that his industry was omitted from a recent planning survey by a major city school system, though it needs and will need great numbers of new workers, particularly women and minorities. Instead, the survey concentrated on fields like janitorial service where career potential is not as great. Vocational educators need to put more thought into what jobs are going to be available and what career they will lead to, the director believes.

Other policy and planning matters that received mention included turf problems — "educators have to get over them, but by the same token the public has got to support the educators" — and help for viable industries — "Why do we have to start training when a plant closes down? Why not take a plant that hasn't changed and infuse some training dollars into it?"

But by far the thorniest "PR" problem for vocational education is the persistent one of a poor image. The problem was mentioned less often by educators than by people in other fields. Even corrections officials said vocational education carries this stigma for their clientele. Students continue to buy the myth that everyone should go to college. Guidance counselors should help to explode that myth but instead they perpetuate it, principally because they are products of the higher education system themselves, a clergyman said.

Having separate vocational campuses may contribute to the image of vocational education as somehow inferior to academic education. One recommendation especially deserves thoughtful consideration: as future vocational facilities are planned, they should be built on the regular school campus. This would also make vocational classes accessible to general track and college preparatory students, who need them no less than students who will go straight from high school to a job.

The converse, bringing students from the regular high school to vocational schools, is the subject of a legislative proposal that creates a unique opportunity for vocational education. Amended Substitute Senate Bill 140, a comprehensive educational reform measure enacted by the Ohio General Assembly in 1989, includes a provision for strengthening the academic programs available to all students by establishing "magnet

schools" in joint vocational schools. The plan takes advantage of the jointure's greater population base and established transportation system. It would leverage the financial resources of the "home school" districts to provide mathematics, science, technology, or language programs beyond the scope of what they could afford individually.

Amended Substitute Senate Bill 140 offers the further advantages of deepening academic students' understanding of vocational disciplines through direct exposure to vocational laboratories while it broadens academic program options for vocational students. The resulting interdisciplinary appreciation would impact positively on the teaching of the work ethic at a time when increasingly vocational education stands in loco parentis for teaching the habit of industry.

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